

This article was written by Mike Young, who travelled with Travel and Trek around the Annapurna Circuit in Mar/Apr 2010. The article considers whether the arrival of dirt tracks on some of the Circuit is or will have an adverse affect.

Whilst the article has been shortened, the words have not been changed.
The full article can be sent on request.

The Annapurna Circuit - is it too late? *by Mike Young*

What are the greatest treks in the world? That's the sort of question that would generate passionate debate and argument amongst strangers and friends alike gathered in many a mountain pub or bunkhouse. It's a personal opinion. Henry Stedman writing in Trek and Mountain magazine listed his top six. Along with favourites such as Kilimanjaro and the Inca Trail, he included the Annapurna Circuit. It's been high on my "to do" list for a number of years, ever since I walked the Annapurna Sanctuary trek back in 1979. However, in recent years the word has been spreading that the trek is losing some of its appeal. Three years ago the advice was "Do it now!" before it becomes too late. The point of concern was the development of mountain tracks into dirt roads used by trucks, 4x4s and motorbikes.

For most people the trek is not a complete circuit, it's more of a horseshoe. Typically the trek starts at Besi Sahar at the end of the asphalt road up the Marsyangdi River, climbs the valley to the town of Manang, crosses the Thorung La to the town of Muktinath, descends the Kali Gandaki valley as far as Tatopani, then climbs a ridge to the town of Ghorepani before finally descending to the town of Birethanti. This is some 220 kilometres long and takes around eighteen days.

At Muktinath there is a monastery sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists and is a destination for pilgrims. The road that has already been developed up the Kali Gandaki valley is primarily to make it easier for these pilgrims to travel to Muktinath. The concern amongst the trekking community was that this traffic would detract from the isolated nature and ambience of the trek. So, my wife Liz and I decided that we'd go and experience it for ourselves. Were we too late?

The trek can be done by either camping or staying at the "tea houses", which are generally independent lodges with a number of twin-bedded rooms, basic sanitary facilities, and a dining room with a varied menu to select from. We decided that we'd go with an organised trek which used the tea-houses and included a guide and porters to carry the bulk of our gear.

Back in 1979 we didn't see porcelain for a fortnight; but now the facilities available at the tea-houses are quite acceptable. It does pay to get your shower in early, especially at the higher altitudes, as the advertised "24 hour solar powered" showers are limited.

.....at Besi Sahar we were met by our porters; Gyanu, Bishnu and Sree. Beyond Besi Sahar the road is a dirt track which is used by 4x4s, buses and trucks. There are plans for a hydro-electric plant up the valley and there are other requirements that justify it being extended up to Manang. Those trekkers short of time can get transport as far as Syange. We had the time, so for that first afternoon walk we shared the road up to Bhulbhule. We saw about a dozen vehicles during the two hour walk. One of the buses that passed us advertised itself as the "Off-road Express".

The next morning we crossed the Marsyangdi River, and from there to Syange we used footpaths on the opposite side of the river to the road. Above Syange we came across a temporary sign advising us to cross the river via a rather rickety temporary bamboo footbridge. This turned out to be because a large yellow piece of earth-moving equipment was working high on the hillside where the track zigzagged up the valley side. It was moving rubble out of the way and in the process several rocks of varying sizes were being dropped onto the track below. Common sense said that this would be a risky route to take though a couple of the mule-trains travelling up the valley did venture that way rather than take the detour.

Having taken lunch at Chamje we were on our way only to find an armed man stopping any one going beyond the village. He was a representative of the company working on the road. This afternoon there were going to be around forty high-explosive detonations in the next couple of kilometres. We were delayed for a couple of hours during that afternoon and then we were above the main area of development.

The people occupying the villages in the upper part of the valley are from the Gurung ethnic group. Their lifestyle is still largely traditional, working the land growing crops and tending animals. However, with the advent of hydro-electric power to the valley they are embracing 21st century technology with satellite television and mobile phones. The entrepreneurs in the community are the ones that have built the tea-houses; some owning more than one and staffing them with managers. These people were somewhat reluctant to speculate on what effect the development of the road through to Manang would have.

At Manang the Himalayan Rescue Association provide daily briefings on Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) and how to avoid it, along with the more serious and potentially deadly High Altitude Cerebral Oedema condition. These talks were reassuring rather than worrying, though the we had already seem some evidence of the necessity with some people turning back having not managed to overcome the symptoms. Thorung La now became very much the focus for the next three days, culminating in a half four departure from Thorung Phedi for the four hour climb to the pass. One of the objectives for the early departure is to get over the pass before the wind gets up. That's the idea, but for us it was blowing a gale as we approached the crest which gave us a significant wind-chill factor on top of the already sub-zero temperature. The welcome cup of tea served in the stone tea-house at the pass was a reviver.

You immediately get the impression that the western side of the Annapurna range is a lot drier and arid compared to what we had passed through so far. As you finally descend into Muktinath you pass the monastery complex above the town. The hillside here is decorated by many hundreds of prayer flags strung across it. It has a quiet contemplative atmosphere about it, until you turn the corner and pass below the monastery and see the motor bikes parked by the gate. Walking on down into the town we arrived at our hotel, incongruously named the "Bob Marley Rasta Restaurant and Reggae Bar". Having stuck largely to a vegetarian diet so far several of us enjoyed the yak steak tonight in celebration of having got pass the literal high-point of the trek.

For the next four days we descended the Kali Gandaki valley. Here there was regular but not heavy traffic on the road all the way from Muktinath. Where we could, Krishna took us on parallel footpaths. This is certainly sensible. The road is very dusty, and in the strong winds that blow up the valley from mid-morning onwards dust is blown around even when it isn't further clouded by passing traffic. We got used to wearing our buffs covering our nose and mouth so that we had the appearance of being bandits from the wild-west.

During the first half of the walk, as you climb higher and get closer to the peaks, you have the feeling that every day provides better and more dramatic views than the day before. This feeling continues until you have crossed the Thorung La and passed below Dhaulagiri. Up until now the one mountain you haven't seen yet is Annapurna I. She eventually comes into view on day 14 of the trek. By this time you do have the feeling that you are now moving away from the highlights. However, there is a "big finish" coming up.

From Tatopani our route took us back up 1800 metres again to Ghorepani. The reason for coming here is that 45 minutes away is the summit of Poon Hill, from where the view at dawn is truly spectacular. There are a number of trekking routes that pass through Ghorepani and so there is quite a party atmosphere each evening, followed the next morning by the walk up to Poon Hill. It's a bit like mid-summer's day at Stonehenge happening every morning. From here you have the vista from Dhaulagiri in the west across the Annapurna Himal to Manaslu away in the east – three of the top 10 highest mountains on the world and all over 8000 metres. For us this was the first sighting we had of Machhapuchhre. Although this mountain is less than 7000 metres

high the view from here shows the distinctive shape of the western ice-field at the summit that gives it its nickname – Mount Fishtail.

Now we were literally downhill all the way to the finish. As we approached Birethanti we again needed to detour around some road developments. In fact, in the town itself we watched with a mixture of admiration and reservation as a team of women and boys were ferrying large baskets full with wet concrete across the river to form the foundation of a bridge that will soon provide access to the new road which will provide for vehicle access all the way to Ghorepani.

I've given here an idea of the developments that we encountered on the trek. When Preetesh asked us in Manang "What brought you to Annapurna?" my answer was "the mountains and the people". I remembered the lasting impression that the Annapurnas gave me in 1979 and the mountains lived up to that memory every bit as much in 2010. They are awesome and they will again be the lasting memory. The people too are wonderful. They fit so very well into the environment. Yes, the little kids greet you with a big grin, put their hands together fingers pointed up and say the traditional greeting "Namaste", and in the same movement hold their hands out palm up and ask for pens or sweets. There is no malice if you decline, though. Their parents are very keen to please. These are tough little people who, though poor by western standards, are largely healthy and they clearly enjoy life. In some respects I envy them.

So, is it too late to trek the Annapurna Circuit? My answer is very definitely "No, it isn't". Sure, if you were there in the 1990s you would now say that the developments have intruded on the enjoyment. If you've never been before but have had a yearning to go then I would say that I guarantee that you'll find it a fantastic trip. Everyone in our group had found the trip exhilarating and rewarding. Viv and John were the ones most disturbed by the traffic in the Kali Gandaki valley. My only recommendation would be to take a mask for those days on the second half when it will be dusty. In the medium term I can see that the Nepalese and the trekking companies will work together to develop variations. These will include paths on the opposite bank to the roads, and will also include add-ons that will take in the side valleys. So, just like the Inca Trail I think that the Annapurna Circuit will evolve, but it won't be dropped from most people's "Top 10" for the foreseeable future.